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SUBJECT: MAYAWATI ON THE MOVE IN SOUTH INDIA

REFS: A) 07 New Delhi 5305 B) 07 Mumbai 699

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati, is moving into South India. BSP previously had little presence in the south, but has recently increased its visibility in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka with Mayawati holding rallies in both states' capitals. Though the results of the rallies are mixed, they reinforce the message that Mayawati's BSP has a national strategy that includes south India. END SUMMARY.

MAYAWATI MAKES A SPLASH IN KARNATAKA

¶2. (U) On December 23 Mayawati headlined a large public rally in Bangalore's Palace Grounds. According to our contacts, the rally drew more than 100,000 participants. In the days leading up to the rally the BSP's blue signs, virtually all of them featuring Mayawati prominently, were ubiquitous around the city. A consulate officer driving through the area observed the BSP placards as far as a hundred kilometers from Bangalore. The BSP banners outnumbered those of Karnataka's major parties combined -- BJP, Janata Dal (Secular), and Congress -- by at least two to one. At the December 23 rally, Mayawati introduced PGR Sindhia, a veteran political operative and former Karnataka state minister from the Janata Dal party, as a national general secretary of the BSP. (Sindhia, long a Janata Dal dissident, had told us several months ago that he -- wanting to make a move to national-level politics -- was contemplating switching parties but that he was not sure which he would choose.)

¶3. (SBU) Previously, BSP was practically nonexistent in Karnataka. The party did not win a single seat in the legislature despite having contested a substantial number of seats in the 2004 elections. As a result, the Bangalore rally, especially the amount of fanfare BSP was able to muster, came as a bit of a surprise in the relative political calm since the dissolution of the state's legislature in October. Sindhia, for his part, downplayed expectations in the short run. He told us that party is focusing on developing at the grassroots. He said the BSP's current thinking on the upcoming state elections is to contest in a few constituencies reserved for dalits and other disadvantaged groups while extending support to Congress in the other constituencies. (EMBASSY COMMENT: But this may be just Sindhia talking as Mayawati's increasingly confrontational approach to the Congress Party leadership in Delhi suggests she will not be inclined to assist the Congress. As in Gujarat and Himachal, she will likely go it alone in Karnataka. END COMMENT.) But Sindhia felt the party would play a crucial role in later Karnataka elections after it had built its grassroots support. A media analyst told post, however, that he did not believe the BSP will be able to follow its formula of winning by consolidating the dalit vote because Karnataka's dalit community is fractured.

AND THEN HEADS TO ANDHRA PRADESH

14. (SBU) Two weeks later Mayawati visited the capital of Andhra Pradesh -- Hyderabad. Turnout was disappointing for her January 6 rally according to our contacts, with only 50,000 attendees coming out. Mayawati caused a stir when she scoffed at the idea of film stars in politics, reportedly saying "film stars can't serve society. They can only dance and sing." (NOTE: In Andhra Pradesh, as well as neighboring Tamil Nadu, there is a robust tradition of film stars moving into politics. Her comments were seen as a veiled shot at recent hints that the popular Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu film star Chiranjeevi would soon enter politics. END NOTE.) The rally also saw breakaway faction of the state's small Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) party led by Member of Parliament A. Narendra merge with the BSP. The merger, however, came with little fanfare and Mayawati relegated Narendra to a far corner of the stage.

15. (SBU) At the January 6 rally Mayawati said her party would create a separate Telangana state if it came to power at the center. Her merger with Narendra's faction of the TRS, a party created with the goal of establishing a separate Telangana state, amplifies her play to pro-Telangana sentiment. Narendra, however, is a discredited figure who was forced to breakaway from the main TRS when the party suspended him for his alleged involvement with a human-trafficking ring. Moreover, Mayawati's comments disparaging film stars moving into politics were seen as a misstep that could alienate Chiranjeevi, who is considering an entry into Andhra Pradesh politics and who will likely command a strong following among the dalits who Mayawati's BSP will also try to mobilize.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Since her resounding 2007 win in Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati has made a determined effort to build her presence and expand her dalit-brahmin coalition outside of her home state, thus laying the foundation of a national party. She has failed to make headway in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh (reftels). Nonetheless, her efforts continue, now in South India. While she appeared to make a splash in Karnataka with the large crowds and ubiquitous placards, her Andhra Pradesh foray was a bit of a mixed bag. Karnataka, with its political scene in disarray since last fall's BJP/JD(S) meltdown, presents an easier target for the BSP. But even there Mayawati's new point man Sindhia is playing down expectations. Also, it is not clear whether the large crowds and fanfare translate into a sustainable political presence. Using monetary and other inducements to gather large crowds at rallies has become standard operating procedure in Indian politicking. But large rallies often have little relationship to actual political strength. Regardless of the ultimate outcome of her southern swing, her recent trips to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh show that she continues to harbor national ambitions. END COMMENT.

17. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

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